

The Political Situation in Arizona

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Things in Arizona are moving at breakneck speed. For years, Arizona has situated itself at the center of the debate around immigration. Current estimates put half a million undocumented people in the state, (out of a total population of six and a half million). In an attempt to keep white supremacists operating within the electoral/legislative compact, the Department of Homeland Security's Border Patrol has staged massive security theater on the Southern US border, pushing greater numbers of workers to cross through Arizona's deserts when making passage to the United States. Arizona has also been the testing ground for anti-immigrant activists in the country. In 2003, BTR members in Phoenix worked with a coalition of activists to combat the Protect Arizona Now Initiative and the birth of the Minutemen Civil Defense Corp. Right wing political activity in the state has set the tone of debate and the scope possibility for the nativist right across the country with state after state modeling anti-immigrant campaigns and initiatives on Arizona's successes.

The terms of the immigration debate in Arizona are echoed nationwide. On one hand there is a nativist, anti-immigration constituency, represented by Sheriff Joe Arpaio and the Minutemen. They want to imprison and/or deport all "illegals." This is a powerful constituency, consisting overwhelmingly of white middle and working class Arizonans, that has the ability to pass anti-immigration laws and politicians. On the other hand there is another powerful constituency led by political and business elites, including Arizona governor Janet Napolitano, Phoenix mayor Phil Gordon, nearly every chamber of commerce, and business owners in the agricultural, construction, restaurant/hotel, and landscaping industries. This constituency realizes the centrality of undocumented labor in Arizona's economy and opposes all legislation that would affect this flow of labor to the state. However, this side does not support citizenship or other rights for undocumented persons. Their goal is to create a modern-day bracero program that will enable the exploitation of undocumented workers without granting them rights or respect. The terms of the debate are extremely limited. Although neither side is a friend of undocumented workers or their allies, this momentary rift within the political class indicates an important opportunity.

Starting last month, Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio decided to further wade into the immigration debate. For almost a month, Joe and his deputized armed volunteers have appeared in Latino communities across Maricopa County, rounding up undocumented workers and terrorizing their communities with pretext stops, checkpoints, and detention centers.

Three Camps in the Struggle

As pointed out before, there are three forces vying for dominance in the context of immigration in Arizona (and the rest of the country).

White Nativists- On the one hand, we have the nativist right, a collection of elements unified around a specific interpretation of US citizenship, culture, and identity founded on white supremacy. The core ideas of this movement are secondhand descendants of outright fascists like the Klan's David Duke and White Aryan Resistance's Tom Metzger, who organized armed border patrols against migrants as far back as 1977. What is significant is how mainstream these once 'marginal' ideas have become, as the Minutemen Project became a household name and a national political force (amazingly despite the apparent incompetence of their leadership) in five short years.

The Bosses- On the other pole, we have the above noted alliance of service, construction, manufacturing, and agribusiness increasingly pressured by the seemingly anti-capitalist (or anti-bourgeois, really?) bent of the anti-immigrant movement's latest attacks-not just against immigrant workers themselves, but against those who employ them as well. As these folks see the nativist movement move from the sidelines (where they could play an effective role in terrorizing and, hopefully pacifying a potentially rebellious undocumented population into a retreat from organized demands for dignity, employment rights, or citizenship) to the mainstream, they now see a threat to profit margins.

Both of the above noted forces have amassed somewhat different alliances and relationships with different arms of both the state and different sectors of capital. They have two important aspects in common from our perspective, however. They have resources, they have legitimacy, and for the moment at least, they have portions of the political class willing to negotiate and capitulate to their demands. We have an unstable political situation, a mass of peoples with common grievances moving towards revolt, and importantly, a fissure emerging between different sectors of the ruling class.

The State- The state is a contested terrain. It is the place where, suddenly we see both camps within political class clamoring for dominance. On one pole, we have Arpaio and ICE, who represent the concessions and power gains of successful organizing by the white nativist base.

The state sets the laws, and through them, runs courtrooms, the police, and other repressive apparatus. This is their terrain; they are strong in the courtrooms and in head on struggle. The masses of people on the receiving end of Arpaio's police tactics and jails, and on the receiving end of ICE's terrorist tactics are well aware of this fact. No amount of symbolic demonstration of the brutality of these institutions will change them (their brutality and the fear it produces in the public is what makes them strong). What people need to see is that they CAN be contested, they can be faced down, and that (in the end), this can lead to their defeat. They don't need more demonstrations of the brutality and power of the state. They need to see its frailty, the true vulnerability of that power.

A New Generation of Activists Meet Unexpressed Frustrations in the Neighborhoods

When Sheriff Arpaio began his most recent incursions into immigrant neighborhoods in the state, a new national grouping of activists (centered in Phoenix) had been attempting to develop a radical pole based around direct action. These folks took to the neighborhoods, effectively challenging the incursions (working alongside the people of the neighborhoods themselves to end them), and as a result of this, a new cleavage within Arizona's political class emerged. Most of these activists have come to political consciousness and developed organizing experiences through the May Day marches and immigrant rights struggles of the four years since Sensenbrenner.

Arpaio's first appearance in neighborhoods was met with angry response, eventually chasing Joe out, and (contrary to his threats to return the next day), he hasn't been seen in that neighborhood since. This activity opened a space for the expression of a more radical resistance to Joe's policies but most importantly, has also exposed a rift between the elite political classes. From that moment forward, local political leadership have condemned the Sheriff's raids. As of this writing, the mayor of Phoenix has demanded a Department of Justice and FBI investigation of

civil rights violations, and the governor of the state has significantly cut funding to the Maricopa County Sheriff's department. As communities across the county have been emboldened by the success of responses to Arpaio, the political terrain across the state is shifting, and the new rifts within the political class represent a ripe political moment's emergence. It is these new possibilities, and the rapidity with which the situation is moving, that indicate the value and importance of Arizona right now.

Practical Ideas—What to do from here?

The situation on the ground right now is tenuous. The Sheriff, facing increased rebellion in the neighborhoods and an increasingly assertive employing class, has backed away from his neighborhood incursions. Folks on the ground have largely been caught in reactive positions, and it remains to be seen whether a strategic campaign can emerge and take the initiative.

Three separate (but overlapping) groups of young radical activists have emerged in Phoenix, and are currently clamoring to determine collective strategy and long term vision. Bring the Ruckus in Flagstaff has initiated a campaign to "Repeal All the (Anti-Immigrant) Laws" and activists in Tucson and across the country are actively attempting to organize in support of the activity emerging in the state.

BTR currently has members in Phoenix and Flagstaff, and is currently organizing to send more organizers to the region. We hope to support work already happening on the ground, but are prioritizing participation in the development of a proactive, strategic vision in the region.

This moment is a critical time in Arizona. As the Minutemen and their allies continue to organize in the streets and the legislature, one ballot measure after another further criminalizes the very existence of half of a million of the state's workers. The 'opposition' political establishment are focused on Bracero programs, work visas, and other forms of indentured servitude. We believe that both a space and the individuals to fill it currently exist in the region, begging for a more radical program. In the short term, we hope to support forces already working on the ground, and to focus on developing the possibilities of a long term campaign capable of mobilizing the support of forces already organizing around the country in support of the work happening in Arizona.

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Pete and Luis are members of Bring the Ruckus.

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